

Special report: Bicyclist, pedestrian fatalities on the rise in suburbs

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Marni Pyke

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Editor's note: This is the first of a continuing series on the rise of bicyclist and pedestrian fatalities in the suburbs.

Are you taking your life in your hands by hopping on a bike or walking in the suburbs?

Every week on average, at least one driver strikes and kills a cyclist or pedestrian on suburban streets, [a Daily Herald analysis](#) of Illinois Department of Transportation data from 2012 to 2015 found.

The grim trend is only intensifying, with the latest fatality occurring Halloween night when [a woman was hit by a car](#) in Woodridge.

The most recent records show fatal collisions between vehicles and people walking or biking spiked by nearly 13 percent from 2014 to 2015.

And, after declining in 2014, overall crashes in the suburbs increased by 433, or 3 percent, in 2015.

Des Plaines leads in fatalities, with nine from 2012 to 2015.

Also with nine deaths is unincorporated Cook County, a patchwork of neighborhoods ranging from congested commercial strips to semirural residential areas.

Aurora, Elgin, Evanston, Joliet, Skokie and Waukegan fall in the top 10 suburbs both for crashes involving pedestrians and for fatalities.

Emily Driscoll and her greyhound, Quincy, both were killed when a driver crashed into them in Naperville. - Courtesy of Tim Driscoll

One of the casualties was Emily Driscoll.

The vivacious college student was walking her greyhound in Naperville when a driver ran a red light, killing Driscoll and the dog.

"Things can change in the blink of an eyelash," said Emily's father, Tim Driscoll.

Another victim was Rosaleen Waters, a former Peace Corps volunteer hit by a car while biking across busy Higgins Road near Schaumburg.

Rosaleen Waters died after being struck by a car while riding her bicycle across Higgins Road near Schaumburg. - Submitted photo

"A bicycle is a vehicle. ... It isn't a toy. It deserves as much right to the road as a car does," said her husband, Tony Waters.

Eric Jakubowski said his wife Joni L. Beaudry did everything she was supposed to do in order to safely cross Central Road in Mount Prospect before she was struck and killed while riding her bike. - Courtesy of Eric Jakubowski

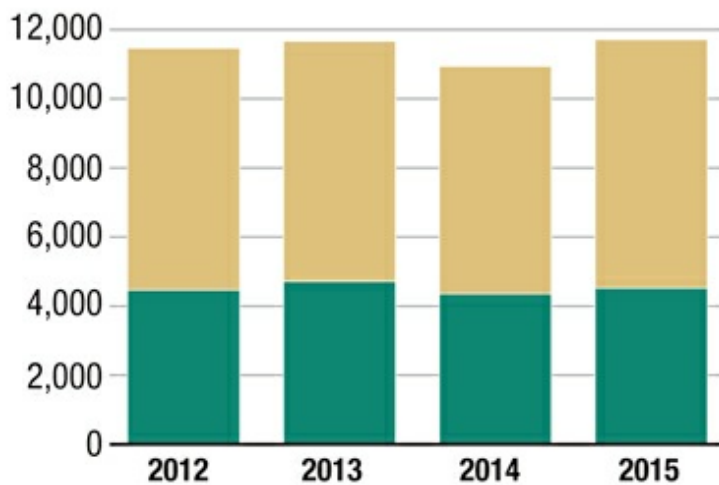
Mother of five Joni Beaudry died cycling across Central Road in Mount Prospect. A driver failed to see her in the crosswalk.

"I worry someone else will be killed," her husband, Eric Jakubowski, told the Daily Herald.

The Daily Herald reviewed 9,868 crashes involving walkers or bicyclists in 246 suburbs between 2012 and 2015, the most recent year for which data is available.

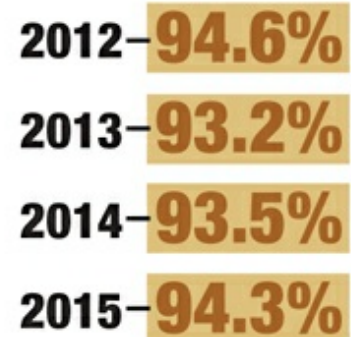
Among the significant findings:

Total crashes

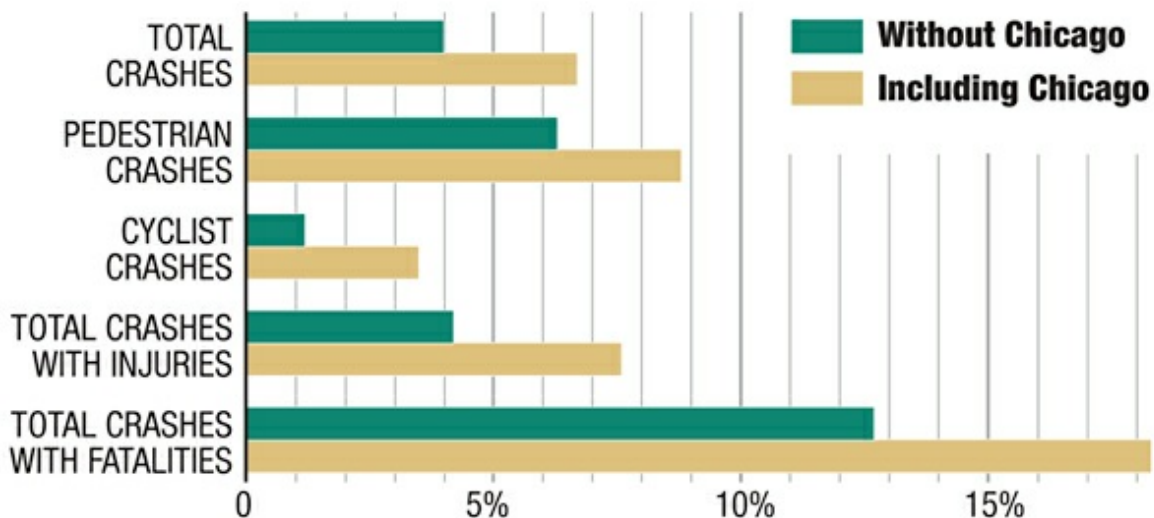


Total crashes with injuries

As percent of total crashes



Percent change, 2014 to 2015



Note: Includes unincorporated areas. Percent change from 2014 to 2015 excludes suburbs with no 2015 data.

Source: Daily Herald analysis of Illinois Department of Transportation data.

- Pedestrians are more at risk of dying than cyclists. Of 250 fatal crashes, 81 percent involved pedestrians. However, overall crashes showed a more even split -- 53 percent involved pedestrians and 47 percent cyclists.
- Crashes are more likely to occur in unincorporated areas than in any one town -- 458 collisions occurred from 2012 to 2015 in unincorporated locations across six counties, which often lack sidewalks and shoulders along roads.
- Fatal crashes reached 71 in 2015, the highest level in four years.
- Most collisions, 94 percent, resulted in pedestrians or cyclists getting hurt.

Itasca-based National Safety Council President Deborah Hersman sees both sides as a suburban driver and cyclist.

"The most dangerous thing we do every day is get behind the wheel. It's a culture on Novocain about the things we do every day. ... We get really complacent and think they're low-risk," she said.

What's happening in the suburbs reflects national patterns, said Hersman, former chairwoman of the National Transportation Safety Board. Pedestrian fatalities in the U.S. rose to 5,987 in 2016, a 9 percent hike from 2015, the Governors Highway Safety Association said. Cyclist deaths rose to 840 in 2016, a 3 percent increase from 2015.

What makes these healthy alternatives to driving so perilous? In part, it's because suburbs could be victims of their own success.

"As we see more people taking to walking and biking because of the great effort communities are putting into infrastructure and creating trail networks, we're seeing more crashes," Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning senior planner Lindsay Bayley said.

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A cyclist riding on the Illinois Prairie Path crosses a busy road in the Wheaton/Glen Ellyn area. Bike paths offer safe passage, but gaps in the trail system deposit riders on high-speed streets. - Bev Horne | Staff Photographer

One example is the Illinois Prairie Path, a popular West suburban trail. About 1,000 trail users intersect with about 15,000 cars every day at York Road in Elmhurst. There have been 50 crashes since 2006, including 11 involving cyclists or pedestrians, city officials reported at an Oct. 23 meeting during which they debated how to make the crossing safer.

At the same time, Americans are driving more. U.S. vehicle miles traveled grew by 3.5 percent from 2014 to 2015.

And at any moment during the daytime, nearly 4 out of 100 drivers on the road are holding a smartphone or device, the U.S. Department of Transportation reports.

Distracted driving is part of the problem in Des Plaines, said police Chief William Kushner. In 2015, 42 pedestrian or bicyclists were involved in collisions with vehicles in Des Plaines. That's 0.71 crash per 1,000 people, higher than the suburban average of 0.53, the [Daily Herald analysis](#) showed.

"We write tickets every week for people texting and driving or using the phone in the non-hands-free mode," Kushner said, adding a car can travel more than 100 feet in a minute.

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Nine pedestrians or cyclists were killed from 2012 to 2015 in Des Plaines, which is working on ways to prevent collisions with vehicles traveling on high-volume Miner Street/Route 14 downtown near a Pace bus stop and Metra station. - Bob Chwedyk | Staff Photographer

It's not just drivers at fault. People walking while using cellphones suffered an estimated 11,101 injuries from 2000 to 2011, the National Safety Council reported.

"A whole lot of these can be reduced just by paying attention. Stay in the moment," said police Sgt. Ken Parcel of Naperville, which had 48 crashes where vehicles struck pedestrians or cyclists in 2015.

In Hawaii, Honolulu leaders last month started fining first offenders up to \$35 if caught texting or staring at smartphones while crossing the street.

Nothing quite that draconian is foreseen in Illinois, but experts are troubled by the stubborn nature of crashes.

Some fault a suburban mindset where cars remain the norm; bikes or people on foot are outliers.

"In Amsterdam, there are thousands and thousands of bikes everywhere, and cyclists are not hit the way they are here because drivers are accustomed to the rules," Des Plaines Sgt. Colin Johnson said. "In my opinion, (suburban) drivers are not accustomed to seeing that."

Safety solutions for bikers and pedestrians

With bike and pedestrian crashes on the rise in the suburbs, officials and advocates seek solutions for safer streets.

A 2010 Illinois law requires drivers to stop for pedestrians in crosswalks, and recent legislation mandates motorists provide a 3-foot buffer around cyclists.

But many drivers are oblivious to such prohibitions, and that needs to change, police say. "Education is the biggest deterrent to accidents," Johnson said.

Another explanation for high crash rates in the suburbs is faulty infrastructure. That includes dangerous crosswalks and a lack of sidewalks and trails.

More than 140 miles of gaps in regional trails such as the Illinois Prairie Path and the Des Plaines River and Algonquin Road trails in Cook County leave cyclists coping with "dangerous and stressful streets," the Active Transportation Alliance concluded in a report on bike crashes this summer.

Hersman, who lives in Barrington, loves to bike but is unnerved by cyclists using Route 59, a busy road with scenic views but high-speed traffic.

"It petrifies me," said Hersman, who prefers quieter streets. "I know too much about the risks."

Given the perils, should suburbs be encouraging bikers and walkers to hit the streets?

Bayley cited reduced pollution, getting into shape and less congestion as reasons to leave the car behind.

"The benefits outweigh the potential risks," he said.

